Community Languages in the UK

A brief guide by Naeema Hann

National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults

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NATECLA receives support from South Birmingham College.

NATECLA would like to thank Trinity College London for their support in producing this leaflet.
This is a brief guide to the learning and teaching of community languages to adults in the UK. It describes who the learners are likely to be, who the teachers are, where the learning happens and what resources and accreditation are available.

This document is written with the changing world in mind. If you would like to correct or add to the information here, please email co-ordinator@natecla.fsnet.co.uk.

In the UK, community languages are understood to be languages, other than English, which are spoken and used within ethnic and/or migrant communities. For a more full definition of the term see www.cilt.org.uk

The learners

These can be broadly grouped into three strands:

• Those who are not literate in their first language at all and need to gain literacy and ‘classroom conventions’ in their first language before they can learn English to live and work in the UK.

• Those who have been through the school system (and higher) in the UK and are learning e.g. Punjabi as their or their partner’s heritage language. This strand often includes adults learning a community language for travel or for work.

• Those who have been through the school system (and higher) in the UK and are learning e.g. Bengali to work as bilingual professionals or as interpreters/ translators.

Usually, an experienced and trained tutor can teach the last two groups successfully in the same session. However, the first group may lose confidence and drop out if taught alongside learners who are already highly literate in another language (Hann and Laher 2002).

The tutors

These tend to be first-language users of the target language and usually have a degree from outside the UK. Some may have a teaching qualification from their country of origin. There are increasing numbers who are accessing Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) programmes in the UK. There is some useful information on QTS and Teaching Assistant (TA) qualifications on www.ourlanguages.org.uk/career-development

CILT and NATECLA provide workshops at conferences for teachers and managers. Contact co-ordinator@natecla.fsnet.co.uk or www.natecla.org.uk for details.

Tutors and managers can receive the free Community Languages Bulletin which gives the latest news on current practice and opportunities for all those involved in community languages education. Register at www.cilt.org.uk/keepintouch/inprint.htm#commlangs

Why do people want to learn community languages?

People want to learn community languages for various reasons. There is a growing number for whom it is a heritage language. Another category of learners needs to learn a community language for work e.g. Pashto/Farsi for army personnel in Afghanistan. Then there is the group that is often hidden and in danger of being forgotten: those who are not literate in their first language and find it difficult to access or progress in ESOL.

Where are the classes?

Classes for adult learners of community languages tend to be at schools, after hours or on Saturdays; community centres, further education colleges, language colleges and occasionally at places of worship such as Gurdwaras.

Accreditation

This ranges from those designed for pure language acquisition to those meant for acquiring bilingual skills. The website of CILT, the National Centre for Languages www.cilt.org.uk gives a comprehensive view of post-14 qualifications for various languages. The Institute of Linguists www.iol.org.uk offers a range of bilingual qualifications, including the opportunity to register on the National Register for Public Service Interpreters.

How can I start a class in my area?

A good place to gauge the demand for a community language would be a parent event like the annual summer fair, or setting up a stand at a parent’s evening. The first step would be to audit which language is likely to attract the highest number of learners, especially if the class is to run on public funding. The next step would be to carry out a screening exercise to sort learners into one or more groups as described above. Advertising the class via bilingual leaflets/posters in local shops, schools, surgeries and on local radio (often there is no charge for community announcements) works well for recruitment.